

Medieval Mystery Plays

The tradition of Passion Plays goes back to medieval times, when they served as both education and entertainment for the population at large. Audiences were entertained under the banner of theatre, but also educated people about the story of Easter. The first recorded piece of theatre in Britain was called the *Quem Quaeritis*: four lines spoken by two choirs addressing each other in a dramatic form. The Church soon realised the power of Theatre as a way to communicate and provoke a response and began to produce what we now know as Mystery Plays.

Medieval Mystery Plays dramatised the whole Bible in a cycle of plays which were performed on pageant wagons at different sites around the city centre. The most well-known cycles are those of York, Coventry, Chester, Lincoln and the East Anglian plays. The plays were a sign of the city's prestige and wealth: the city's guilds were responsible for producing each play and it was both an act of spiritual worship and civic glory. In York, Mystery Plays dramatised the Bible from the Fall of Man (performed by the Coopers) to the Last Judgement (performed by the Mercers). As part of the cycle, the Flood was performed by the Fishers and Mariners, the Slaughter of the Innocents by the Girdlers and Nailers and the Resurrection by the Carpenters.

Medieval Mystery plays were not only spectacular and memorable, they had a spiritual, social and didactic purpose: presenting the Bible as embodied drama they were a means of instruction as well as of spiritual experience. In attending these plays the audience were witnesses to the performance and also to the spiritual realities behind the performance. As Dee Dyas (1997) puts it, the audience were 'vital players in this epic drama, for the mystery cycles, the miracles or saint's plays and the moralities were all designed to warn and win souls' (p.225).

The structure of the plays and their use of symbolism and typology meant that they could present a narrative that connected the characters and events portrayed with the individual lives of the people who watched them and the collective life of the city in which they were performed. The city centres, as the place of performance, linked the (biblical) past to the (medieval) present, investing city sites with layers of spiritual, political, religious and symbolic significance as well as offering a permanent reminder of the biblical narrative for city-dwellers.

Medieval Mystery plays were highly popular performances of piety which brought a city's guilds and citizens together to prepare and witness the plays, as well as attracting visitors from surrounding cities and towns. Royal and noble visitors to cities which performed Mystery Plays had special plays put on for them, such as those put on by the guilds of Coventry for Margaret of Anjou in 1457 (who was reportedly disappointed that she missed the Draper's Doomsday play due to lack of daylight), Richard III in 1485 (less than three months before his death), and Henry VIII in 1493 (King and Davidson, 2000). Mystery Plays thus promoted civic prestige and economy, adding to the reputation of the town as well as the honour of God. Dyas (1997) described them as a 'neat blend of religious fervour and burgeoning civic pride'.

Their ability to tap into the civic, religious and social needs of a city made them not only significant in the formation of that city's identity and importance, but also part of its social, cultural and economic fabric (Davidson, 2013).

Costumes, Props and Staging.

Medieval Mystery Plays were ambitious in what they represented on the pageant wagons that processed from station to station: supernatural beings from God, to angels, to devils were represented and events such as the creation of the world, a world-wide flood and the final destruction of the earth were portrayed. Mystery Plays covered stories from the whole sweep of Biblical history from Creation to Judgment Day, with many also adding in the events that preceded this to include the Fall of Lucifer. Pickering (2010) describes the Mystery plays as a montage of cosmic drama presented in intensely human terms:

Like the scriptures that inspired them, they present a tapestry of memorable characters: tyrant kings, pompous prelates, eccentric prophets, talking donkeys, rough shepherds, loose women, beautiful people, and criminals – and at any moment a life can be transformed by an encounter with God, His Son or an Angel. The plays appear to have been written by playwrights who never allowed piety to swamp their humanity and they abound with humour, music, pathos, dancing, tension, refinement and vulgarity.

Costumes, props, music and special effects were also used by the guilds as they put on their plays and often made according to their unique craftsmanship. So the guild responsible for the Last Supper in the York Cycle was the Bakers Guild and presumably it was the bread they made which was broken by Jesus. As Beadle and King (2009) point out this has less to do with modern ideas of advertising their craft or selling more loaves of bread and should be understood more in terms of their understanding of the sanctity of everyday life, where their skills, labour and products were from God and for God.

Costumes and props were also used by the guilds and often included a gilded face for God in creation plays, a donkey outfit for the Balaam plays, ... and even fireworks for the increasingly dramatic finale of the Cycle as the world was destroyed in a flurry of sparks. Other special effects were created by the pageant wagon itself which was offered at its simplest a raised stage and at its most sophisticated a two-story structure which had machinery to raise and lower angels and also a trapdoor that opened up to hell. This hell mouth became an increasingly spectacular construct and engravings show a gaping, monstrous mouth spurting flames and engulfing men and women who were bound for hell.

Contemporary Mystery Plays

The revival of Mystery plays began with the York Mystery plays in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain and the Chester Mystery plays in the 1970s. Some productions of the Mystery Plays, especially those in the 70s, recreated not only the cyclic nature of the plays, but also the processional staging of them along medieval festival routes and the use of wagons designed

on existing descriptions of their medieval counterparts. Modern Mystery and Passion plays capture a sense of civic pride and community cooperation in a different way to their medieval counterparts. They draw people together for a religious and historical community event which also brings the city economic and cultural benefits.

Modern productions of the Mystery plays that seek to recreate medieval practice have been invaluable in providing audiences with an understanding of the medieval context of the plays and in forging links with their city's past. Yet, while attempting to capture the community and religious experience of medieval performances, they run into difficulties in modern cities which do not cater for historical re-enactments involving wagons, processions along historical routes and medieval scripts. Productions of the Mystery plays that do adapt to the logistics and tastes of contemporary audiences and their cities are, however, immensely popular. The successful York Mystery Plays 2012, the Manchester Passion of 2006 and the Preston Passion televised by the BBC in 2012 demonstrate this.

References:

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